

# Cancer unit backs asbestos victims

By **ALAN MacDERMID**  
Medical Correspondent

CLAIMS by Clyde shipyard veterans that thousands of UK asbestos victims have been wrongfully denied compensation are backed today in a report by cancer experts.

They say that more than one in 20 of all lung cancers in men in the West of Scotland are asbestos-related, giving a conservative estimate of 1081 cases over a 10-year period.

"Most of these may not have been considered for compensation by the Department of Social Security," says the report in the British Medical Journal by the West of Scotland Cancer Surveillance Unit based at Ruchill Hospital.

Members of victim support group Clydeside Action on Asbestos welcomed the thrust of the report but claimed the numbers affected were even higher than estimated.

"We have had 20 deaths from asbestos-related disease in the past few weeks," said researcher Ian McKechnie. "Many are undiagnosed and reported as respiratory failure or heart failure. This is an epidemic and will continue well into the next century."

The report challenges the Department of Social Security's refusal to accept lung cancer as an asbestos-related occupational disease without the presence of other symptoms.

It will also stir the medical debate on whether lung cancer requires heavy, long-term exposure to asbestos — the view tak-

en by DSS medical boards — or whether very low or short-term exposure is enough — the view of Britain's most distinguished cancer epidemiologists, Doll and Peto.

The Ruchill report concludes: "Given the very small annual number of recorded cases of asbestosis, this condition is probably not a prerequisite for the development of asbestos-related lung cancer."

Research epidemiologist Dr Helene De Vos Irvine said: "We undertook the study to find out why male smokers locally experience twice the rate of death from lung cancer for the same amount of cigarettes smoked than men elsewhere."

"Asbestos accounts for some of this discrepancy but not all of it. The trouble is this research doesn't tell you which lung cancer is asbestos-related and which isn't, and the Government isn't going to pay out compensation without proof."

Asbestos of all types was used for insulation in the shipbuilding industry, and was also used in gasworks, railway locomotives, homes, and factories on Clydeside.

In spite of the high usage, the researchers had to turn to America for data on the extent of asbestos-related lung cancer. They were able to relate it to the incidence of mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the lung almost exclusively associated with asbestos.

The Health and Safety Executive estimates that there are two cases of asbestos-related lung cancer for each of the 800 mesothelioma cases seen every year

Britain as a whole, i.e. 1600 a year.

"This contrasts with the 59 awards made to victims of asbestos-related lung cancer in 1988 in the whole of the UK — it is rather sad and depressing to see this," said Dr Irvine.

"Clearly, most cases do not receive compensation. For this to improve, it is at the very least essential that a full occupational history is taken from any man with lung cancer who was in employment during the Second World War or until 1969, when asbestos regulations came into being."

The researchers recommend a lung biopsy in order to measure the presence of fibres in the tissue.

Members of Clydeside Action on Asbestos are suspicious of biopsies, fearing that they can spread tumorous cells and hasten death. Dr Irvine acknowledged this in the case of mesothelioma but in lung cancer an X-ray can show up areas free of tumour where the needle can be inserted to extract the tell-tale fibres.

Even if the victims agreed to biopsies, the DSS would have to change its own rules to admit the presence of fibres as confirmation, instead of insisting on the presence of the other symptoms.

The possibility of wider diagnoses could spell trouble for the insurance market. The Society of Names at Lloyds reported recently that asbestos and pollution claims in the United States could cost non-US insurers alone up to \$639 billion.

## Action urged to save salmon stocks

By **BENEDICT BROGAN**

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